

VZCZCXYZ0035
OO RUEHWEB

DE RUEHBU #1235/01 3241653
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O R 201653Z NOV 09
FM AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 0071
INFO MERCOSUR COLLECTIVE
RHEHNSC/WHITE HOUSE NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC
RUCQSB/USSOCOM INTEL MACDILL AFB FL

C O N F I D E N T I A L BUENOS AIRES 001235

NOFORN
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 2034/11/20

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [AR](#)

SUBJECT: (C) ARGENTINA: CFK'S FIRST TWO CABINET CHIEFS SAY KIRCHNERS' SHELF-LIFE WILL EXPIRE IN 2011

REF: BUENOS AIRES 1026; BUENOS AIRES 301

CLASSIFIED BY: Tom Kelly, DCM, DOS, EXEC; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

¶1. (C) Summary: Over the past six weeks, we have held several conversations with President Fernandez de Kirchner's first two Cabinet Chiefs, Alberto Fernandez and Sergio Massa. Both believe that the Kirchners, despite their recent political successes, cannot win re-election in 2011. They disagree on whom is next in line: Fernandez thinks that the next President will be Vice President Julio Cobos, while Massa believes that Senator Carlos Reutemann will prevail. Both ex-Cabinet chiefs are (separately) plotting their futures in a post-Kirchner political landscape. Massa expanded on earlier comments to us (ref a) on life with the Kirchners, describing ex-president Nestor Kirchner as a "monster" and a "psychopath." End Summary.

¶2. (C) We have had several conversations with the first two Cabinet Chiefs of Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner (CFK), Alberto Fernandez and Sergio Massa. The Ambassador had an introductory meeting with Alberto Fernandez, who served as Cabinet Chief in both Nestor and CFK's administrations, on October 28, and DCM lunched with Fernandez on October 2. The Ambassador and DCM also had dinner with CFK's second cabinet chief Sergio Massa and his wife, city councilor-elect Malena Galmarini, at the home of Massa's former Casa Rosada aide, businessman Jorge O'Reilly, on November ¶12. In each of these conversations, the two prominent Peronists, who during their tenures in the Casa Rosada worked every day with the Kirchners to run the Argentine government, were quite frank in expressing their estrangement from the Kirchners and their pessimism about the first couple's political prospects.

Alberto and Massa Agree: Kirchners Will Lose in 2011

¶3. (C) Massa said that the Kirchners have no chance to capture the presidency in 2011. When asked to estimate their chances, Massa replied, "zero." He also discounted the view that the Kirchners would extend their rule through Chavez-style governance. Massa said that, for all of its problems, Argentina is not Venezuela. Its society remained too literate, too middle class, and too "temperate," and its economy is far more complex and diverse than Venezuela's oil monoculture. Argentina, he said, would not abide the Kirchner's attempts to consolidate power through more autocratic rule. The result of their hardball tactics after the midterm elections, he argued, was even more negative ratings in the polls.

¶4. (C) Fernandez predicted that Nestor would be the Kirchners'

presidential candidate in 2011. He claimed that Nestor has a better reputation for competence than CFK. Fernandez told the DCM that his soundings on CFK's potential run for re-election invariably provoked reactions of alarm and exasperation.

¶15. (C) But Nestor cannot possibly win, continued Fernandez, comparing the former president to Carlos Menem circa 1999. He said that, like Menem ten years ago, Kirchner could hope for no more than 20 percent of the votes in the first round of the presidential election. These voters, he continued, are Kirchner "fundamentalists" whose votes reflect ideological affinity or association with the various political machines (controlled by piqueteros, labor leaders, etc.) that remain loyal to the Kirchner project. Fernandez said that, because Kirchner at this point in his political career has zero attraction to independent voters, he could expect to win no more votes in the second round of elections than he would in the first. Fernandez predicted that Nestor would run and CFK would increasingly govern from the Left, as that "is the only constituency that remains to them." He added, though, that such a strategy was doomed to fail -- "the Left on its own can't elect anyone to the Presidency in this country," he said.

Alberto and Massa Disagree on Next President

¶16. (C) Massa identified Santa Fe Senator Carlos Reutemann as the likely presidential winner in 2011. He said that Reutemann's strategy of lying low was prudent, not a blunder or sign of indecision as often portrayed in the press. With Reutemann quiet, the Kirchner machine was focused on pummeling Vice President Cobos and Buenos Aires Mayor Mauricio Macri. The onslaught, he argued, would damage both of those potential opponents to a Reutemann candidacy. When the race really begins, Reutemann would be well-placed to obtain the Peronist nomination and steamroll the rest of the field. Massa said that the Peronist race would not begin in earnest until May 1, 2010, when he said five large Peronist rallies would mark May Day for the first time in years.

¶17. (C) Alberto Fernandez identified Vice President Cobos as the next president of Argentina. Fernandez noted that Cobos continues to be the most popular politician in the country, and is conserving his advantage intelligently. He expected that Coalicion Civica leader Elisa Carrio, the runner-up in the 2007 election and a bitter rival of Cobos, would run in the first round and win a maximum of 12 percent of the vote, deflating the Vice President's first-round numbers, but Cobos would come out on top. "It's his election to lose," concluded Fernandez. He took issue with Massa's view that Peronists would prevail once they united behind a candidate. Fernandez, a long-time Peronist activist who headed the party apparatus in Buenos Aires city for many years, said that his party only controls the loyalty of 38 percent of the electorate. Given the Kirchners' continuing control over the party apparatus, the Peronist candidate, even if it ends up being someone with a last name that is not Kirchner, would not appeal to non-Peronist voters in 2011. The party's presidential prospects in the coming election were therefore, in Fernandez's view, poor.

Massa: Nestor is a Monster and Psychopath

¶18. (C) Massa was scathing in his criticism of the first couple, especially Nestor. Though he made light of press reports that he and Kirchner came to blows at the campaign bunker in the pre-dawn hours after their mid-term defeat last June, he called Nestor "a psychopath," "a monster," and "a coward" whose bullying approach to politics masks a deep sense of insecurity and inferiority. (Massa's wife registered such alarm at these uninhibited comments that he asked her to "stop making faces at me.") He disputed the argument that Nestor deserved credit as a savvy tactician,

describing the ex-president as blunder-prone and so convinced of his own brilliance that he was certain to keep making mistakes. (We've heard similar comments from Fernandez on Nestor's faltering political judgment -- ref b.) He said that Nestor could not relate to others outside the narrow gauge of his own political ambitions: "Kirchner's not a perverse genius," Massa concluded. "He is just perverse."

¶9. (C) Massa described his twelve-month term as Cabinet Chief as an ordeal, as he struggled to deal with a controlling presidential spouse and a "submissive, withdrawn" President "who would be much better without Nestor than she is with him." He said that, during his tenure at the Casa Rosada, he decided to do the Oprah-like daytime TV show hosted by grand dame Mirtha Legrand. On the set minutes before the show's taping began, he received a call from Nestor instructing him to walk off the set because the apolitical Legrand "was an opposition figure." Massa told him he would do the show unless his official boss CFK, who was travelling abroad, instructed him otherwise. He then received three successive calls from Cabinet members pleading with him not to do the show. Massa did not follow their advice.

Both Focusing on Post-Kirchner Future

¶10. (C) As for his own plans, Massa confirmed that he plans to run in 2011 for governor of Buenos Aires province, which could pit him against midterm winner Francisco de Narvaez, incumbent Daniel Scioli and labor strongman Hugo Moyano. Massa said that he will

announce his candidacy on the third week of January, the week when (largely vacationing) Argentines buy the most newspapers. Fernandez also commented on the Buenos Aires race, opining that Scioli's political moment had passed. Calling the governor "a nice guy," he observed that Nestor had used him (by grabbing him as his slate-mate in the province during the midterms) and then cast him aside. "Scioli is trapped, and he knows it," Fernandez said.

¶11. (C) Fernandez remains politically active as well. He told the DCM that he is talking to many political figures within and outside Peronism, including Cobos and the fellow would-be Peronist kingmaker, ex-President Eduardo Duhalde. Within the party, he expressed particular interest in the 40-year-old governor of Salta province Juan Manuel Urtubey. He said that, despite his belief that Cobos is likely to win the presidency, he is counseling Urtubey to throw his hat in the ring. He says that the campaign strategy would be to nudge Nestor out in the first round for second place, and then emerge as the Peronist candidate in the run-off against Cobos. (Comment: It appears that Urtubey, once regarded as a reliable Kirchner ally, is listening. He agreed to host Fernandez in a much-photographed visit to Salta on November 14, fueling speculation that the two were plotting a presidential run.)

Comment: Common Views, Divergent Paths

¶12. (C) Massa and Fernandez have much in common, from their unique experience in CFK's cabinet to their active roles in the burgeoning anti-Kirchner movement within Peronism. They are both generally pro-American in orientation. They do not, however, work together very closely, and their futures seem quite different. Fernandez, 50, is low-key and content to operate in the background while others take the spotlight. The most that he seems to aspire to is success in behind-the-scenes political kingmaking, which could restore him to his former status as the country's most influential political consigliore. Massa, 37, the younger man by

more than a decade, has more ambitious plans. He hopes to win the Buenos Aires governorship and, eventually, the Argentine presidency.

MARTINEZ